

Concerto in D Minor – Aram Khatchaturian, arr. Jean-Pierre Rampal

Aram Khatchaturian was the third member of the mighty triumvirate of Soviet composers – the others, of course, being Shostakovich and Prokofiev. And like the others, he too enjoyed a long, hot and cold relationship with the Communist party and those who dictated the musical aesthetics of that troubled time. A native Armenian – and born in Georgia like Stalin – he early on moved to Moscow to further his musical studies, but for the rest of his life infused his music with vivid stylistic influences from his Armenian heritage. His personal musical language is almost unmistakable, often characterized by melodies that are oriented to folk or popular elements, a remarkable rhythmic drive, and a masterful command of colorful orchestral writing.

American audiences have long known his ballets, *Spartacus* (1950-54) and *Gayane* (1942), the latter being the source of the evergreen “Saber Dance.” While writing in the usual media of symphony, piano, and instrumental chamber works, he is well known for his many contributions to incidental music for plays, film scores, and even Soviet Army brass bands. His Concerto in D Minor (1940) was originally written for violin and orchestra (dedicated to the renowned Russian violinist David Oistrakh) – and is widely performed thus. Years later, the eminent French flautist, Jean-Pierre Rampal came to Khatchaturian and requested a flute concerto. For various reasons it didn’t materialize, but with the composer’s blessing and encouragement, Rampal arranged the Concerto in D Minor for flute. The original cadenza, like all cadenzas, is completely idiomatic for the solo instrument, in that case the violin, so Rampal sensibly wrote his own cadenza to suite his virtuosity on the flute. Completed in 1967, Rampal’s arrangement has become a respected addition to the concert flute repertoire, and is performed the world over.

The first movement opens with a big statement from the whole orchestra, and the solo flute gets right to work with a driving, almost frenetic theme that is catchy, and rather dance-like. Khatchaturian’s signature, almost hypnotic rhythms and “punchy” accents carry it all along. Some contrasting themes eventually come along that are more lyrical and somewhat pseudo-oriental to take us to the middle section which is framed by cadenzas for the solo flute. The second cadenza is extensive (written by Rampal), and after a sedate beginning, is marked by exchanges with the solo clarinet. The music intensifies, and a recap of themes careens to the end. It’s a long movement, but it certainly entertains.

The second movement opens with melancholy solos by the bassoon and the clarinet, aptly setting up a rather stark mood. Throughout the movement the solo flute languorously evokes the exoticism that so often is characteristic of Armenian composers, and reminds us again that Khatchaturian was not an ethnic Russian, but rather a Soviet citizen. A dramatic outburst provides contrast near the middle of the movement, before the bleak atmosphere returns.

A big fanfare from the orchestra that would do 20th Century Fox justice clues us to what we’re in store for in the finale. The main theme is not exactly singable, as the flute spews forth torrents of notes that sound at times like a virtuoso bebop improvisation. If you remember the composer’s “Saber Dance,” the excitement generated is familiar. Along the way, tunes from earlier in the concerto are heard as we zip along in a veritable *moto perpetuo*. We’re spurred ahead by another of Khatchaturian’s mannerisms: strong

accents that temporarily confuse the meter. Are we in two or three? From time to time there are rather lyrical, reflective episodes to rest our nerves, but the wild, Mongolian pony ride resumes, and a cascade of notes from the flute ends this musical flamboyance.

Chairman Dances: "Foxtrot for Orchestra"--John Adams

This composition is a brilliant little piece that, despite its evident attractiveness, doesn't quite convey the significance of its composer. Adams is perhaps the most important and distinguished composer of our time. Many critics hail him as the clear successor to the mantle of Aaron Copland, and they have ample reason to do so. One respected writer deemed him " . . . the exemplary American composer," dismissing the music of Samuel Barber as too "genteel," that of Charles Ives as too "ornery," Bernstein as too "inconsistent," and Elliot Carter as too "ugly." No American composer of the last quarter century or so has composed so many significant works, so well received by both critics and the broader audiences, as has he.

He was born and raised in Massachusetts, educated at Harvard University and has since spent his time living, composing, and teaching in and near San Francisco. Earlier in his career he was pigeonholed as a "minimalist," along with Terry Riley and Steve Reich, but he has enriched and broadened his compositional style considerably since those early days in the 1970s in the Bay Area. He eschews the "systems" of composition so rigidly characteristic of academic composers of the post-war period, rather drawing upon an eclectic variety of musical resources. He was raised in a family that valued big band music as well as Mozart, and he played in a marching band as a teenager. He was a substitute clarinet player in the Boston Symphony and continues to conduct on an occasional basis. His music is founded thoroughly in a deep respect for the great variety of human experience in our culture, viewed through the prism of a nuanced intellectuality— not unlike Copland. And in the same way, his music is popular. He can be controversial: witness the firestorm surrounding his opera about the hijacking of the cruise ship, Achille Lauro, *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1990), which many critics found anti-Semitic. His recent opera, *Doctor Atomic*, is about Robert Oppenheimer and the events leading to the first test of the atomic bomb. He was honored with a commission by the New York Philharmonic to compose *The Transmigration of Souls* for its first anniversary observance of the events of 9/11 in 2002. That work was universally hailed for its sensitivity to personal loss without the bathos of political and patriotic excess.

He is perhaps best known for his opera, *Nixon in China*, given its première by the Houston Grand Opera in 1987. *Chairman Dances* is taken from the last of the three acts of the opera—the last night in China. The main characters, of course, are Dick and Pat Nixon and Chairman Mao and his wife, as well as Kissinger and Chou En-lai. In this act they dance a foxtrot while reflecting upon their individual pasts, and the meaning, respectively, of their life's work. The foxtrot was extracted from the opera before its première, and published separately. Two characteristics of Adams's work are apparent here: his fascination with contemporary politics and culture, and his appreciation for popular music of the past.

Danzon No. 2 for Large Orchestra— Arturo Márquez

Márquez is a Mexican composer who spent his youth in a suburb of Los Angeles. After early musical training on trombone, violin, and piano, he became a student at the Conservatorio Nacional in the early nineteen seventies and then later studied in Europe with the eminent French composer, Jacques Castérède. He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to the California Institute of the Arts, where he studied with the well-known American composer Morton Subotnick. Under the influence of the latter composer, earlier on he was active in a compositional style that featured mixed media excursions in dance, theatre, and film. Computers, tape, electro-acoustic devices, unusual percussion instruments, and actors all contributed to an avant-garde reputation. But all has not been on the cutting edge, for he is also known for his interest in popular urban musical styles, expressed in more conventional ensembles. Exemplary of the latter compositions are his *Danzones*, rhythmic dance-like compositions that capture the vitality of the contemporary Latin-American urban scene. They take their stylistic cue from the music of the Mexican state of Veracruz, as well as of Cuba. *Danzon* No. 2, perhaps his most well known work for orchestra, was commissioned by the National Autonomous University of Mexico, and had its première in 1994.

Four Dance Episodes from *Rodeo* Aaron Copland

Aaron Copland is a man who is hard to pin down. Clearly America's most well-known and respected "classical" composer, he was the creator of some of the country's most beloved compositions that brought the "American" style to the concert hall. Yet for all that, he was a musician with a remarkably broad range of personal interests and musical styles. His deep intellect and discerning tastes probed and were influenced by about all of the important composers and approaches to composition of the twentieth century. He spent time in his early maturity in France, where he immersed himself in the European musical avant-garde; he was interested in and was influenced by jazz; he maintained a life-long interest in the music of Latin America; he participated fully in the burgeoning interest on the part of the arts community in American folk elements and nationalism during the 1930s and 40s; and later in his life explored the dissonant musical idioms of the European avant-garde, yet again. But, he was not an artistic chameleon, rather a man who saw vitality, authenticity, and artistic possibilities in most of what his probing mind and "big" ears encountered.

During the Great Depression difficult economic conditions, as well as other political and social factors, led American artists to ally themselves with public intellectuals in a variety of sectors in celebrating and promulgating the American common experience. It was perhaps the dominating artistic paradigm of the times, and even today remnants may be seen in such unexpected places as Post Office lobbies where the WPA commissioned murals on populist themes. Copland's compositions from this time—the ballet, *Billy the Kid* (1939); *Our Town* (1940); *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942); and *A Lincoln Portrait* (1942)—all are signature works of the man and the era. And in the same fecund year as the latter two works came the ballet, *Rodeo*.

The American choreographer, Agnes de Mille, was commissioned in that year by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (then in the US) for a ballet on cowboy themes of the

American west. She responded with an apparently simple story: Awkward Cowgirl strives for the affections of the Head Wrangler, who is more interested in the winsome and feminine Rancher's Daughter. She tries to be a "real cowboy" by competing with the men on their own grounds, but only attracts the attention of the Champion Roper. Finally, she wins the day with the Head Wrangler by revealing her femininity and donning a dress for the Hoedown.

The first movement "Buckaroo Holiday" begins energetically, followed by subdued music for the cowgirl. Real galloping rodeo music ensues, followed shortly by the big entrance of the boisterous cowboys, accompanied by the traditional "Sis Joe" railroad tune. "If He'd be a Buckaroo" figures prominently, along with "Sis Joe," as the movement develops. The second movement is quiet reflection by the cowgirl, entitled "Corral Nocturne," in which she considers her frustration at failing to impress the men and her love interest, specifically. Gentle woodwind solos accompany her contemplation of awkwardness. "Saturday Night Waltz" brings all the principals together in a social showdown to the tune of "I Ride an Old Paint." The Cowgirl loses the affection wars to the Rancher's Daughter and is left with the Champion Roper. Finally, the exuberant and familiar last movement "Hoedown" comes, opening with a literal quotation by Copland of the fiddle tune, "Bonaparte's Retreat," made famous by the Kentucky fiddler, William Stepp, in a 1937 Library of Congress recording. Other traditional songs heard are "McLeod's Reel" and "Gilderoy," as the Cowgirl finally wins her man, the Head Wrangler, at the big dance.

--William E. Runyan

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